TRUMPET, TIMBREL AND LOUD CLASHING CYMBALS

October 14, 1990

8:30 and 11:00 a.m. Worship Services

John M. Buchanan

Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Scripture
Matthew 21:33-43
Philippians 4:4-7

"Let everything that breathes praise the Lord."
-Psalm 150:6(RSV)

In this gorgeous Gothic space there is a silent, continual music playing. Overhead at the top of each column, there is an angel. Most are holding musical instruments. You have to look carefully to see them. The first is playing a stringed instrument, like a cello. It's actually a viol. Directly across a trumpet is playing. Beside him is a lyre and harp. Back across the way are bells, and number five on your right, cymbals poised - about to be clashed together; and, in back there is a drum and one man holding a score of music. The architect and interior design people who planned and built this space seventy-six years ago chose Psalm 150 as the guiding, defining motif. They were, I believe, inspired. My guess is that there were no more actual cymbals clashing in this space then than there are now, probably far fewer trumpets, stringed instruments and pipes. Presbyterian worship in the early twentieth century was not exactly exuberant. In fact, for a long time our Presbyterian forbears were suspicious of musical instruments in God's house, Psalm 150 notwithstanding. Nevertheless, those artists knew something important, namely that the essence of religion is praise: that the heart of the matter is not penitence, confession, reverence, sacrifice, but praise, glorious music, sung and accompanied by trumpet and timbrel and loud clashing cymbals.

Perhaps the architect, in preparing for his task, read the Catechism. When an assembly of British Calvinists gathered in London in the 17th century to write down what became the basic tenets of Presbyterianism they produced a major statement, the Westminister Confession of Faith, and two teaching tools, the Larger and Shorter Catechisms. When I became a church member, a "Communicant" at the age of twelve, the way you did it was to memorize the Shorter Catechism. I recall none of it, except the first question and answer, and almost everybody remembers it:

What is the chief end of man?
Man's chief end is to gloryfy God
and enjoy him forever.

The architects knew it. The old theologians knew it. The person who collected 150 separate hymns and poems and prayers in the Psalter knew it by choosing a glorious doxology as the conclusion, the climax to the collection. There are actually five of them, Psalms 146 through 150: the Hallel Psalms; each begins with the Hebrew word for Hallelujah; Hallel = praise, jah = short form of Jahweh. "Praise the Lord."

There is in the earliest religion of our Jewish forbears, a religion which produced and nurtured Jesus of Nazareth; a curious idea that the purpose of human life is to praise God, that the goal of life is what Old Testament scholar Walter Bruggemann calls extravagant, spontaneous, unreserved adoration of God. "Praise is Israel's proper destiny." The final expectation of the Old Testament is not obedience to the law, but the adoration of God. Heaven is where God is praised continually. [The Message of the Psalms]

It's a deceptively simple concept. It does not mean that God needs our praise, but that there is something about us that is incomplete until we engage in the adoration of God. But at first it appears to be a religious duty upon which we will one day be judged.

C. S. Lewis wrote a helpful little book on the Psalms in which he confesses that he was put off by the Biblical insistence on the praise of God.

He wrote:

> "When I first began to draw near to belief in God and even for sometime after... I found a stumbling block in the demand so clamorously made by all religious people that we should 'praise' God; still more is the suggestion that God himself demands it. 'What kind of God,' Lewis asked at first, would engage in what seems like pettiness.' We all despise the man who demands continued assurance of his own virtue, intelligence or delightfulness; we despise still more the crowd of people around every dictator, every millionaire, every celebrity, who gratify that demand. Is that what worship is?... fawning over a God who apparently needs a lot of love and praise? The notion that God commands this sort of non-stop, obsequiousness seemed to him nothing short of **silly pagan bargaining**."
> [Reflections on the Psalms, p. 77]

But then Lewis began to understand that there is a deeper wisdom here. Ever the careful analyst, he saw that there is a sense in which all true human enjoyment overflows into praise. Who hasn't experienced the frustration, the sense of incompleteness when we were not able to share joy, happiness, love, beauty, passion? It's very difficult to enjoy solitary beauty in isolation: It is almost impossible to enjoy a beautiful painting,a wonderful piece of music or a lovely sunset on the lakefront and not at least say to the stranger beside you "isn't that lovely?" And the deeper and more profound the joy or grief, the more it demands to be communicated, expressed interpersonally. One of my enduring memories of

our first months in Chicago was that incredible night in January of 1986 when the Chicago Bears won the Super Bowl, and the exuberant, extravagant joy that simply had to be expressed. People were literally beside themselves, leaping out of cars on Michigan Avenue to shake hands, hug even (it was a very cold night) and then leap back in as the light changed. I put on a coat and went out to be part of it. It seemed the most natural thing in the world to exchange a "high five" with total strangers on the sidewalk.

C. S. Lewis suggests that a feeling isn't complete, isn't really felt, until it is expressed. He wrote poignantly about the incomplete and crippled lives of those who are tone-deaf, have never been in love, never cared for a good book, never enjoyed the feel of morning air on cheeks. "Praise," he said, "almost seems to be inner health made audible."

And so this praising God business, finally, is about us - our need to praise in order to be fully alive, fully human. That's what the Old Testament knows about us with all this urging us to Praise the Lord. Lewis wrote:

> "God is that object to admire which is simply to be awake, to have entered the real world: not to appreciate which is to have lost the greatest experience, and in the end to have lost all." [p. 79]

And several centuries before C. S. Lewis, another Englishman, Shakespeare, wrote similarly:

> "The man that hath no music in himself, nor
> is not mov'd with concord of sweet sounds,
> Is fit for treason, strategems, and spoils:
> The motions of his spirit are dull as night...
> Let no such man be trusted."
> [The Merchant of Venice]

It is an important step in our spiritual maturation when we learn that we come to church not because God needs us to be here, but because we need to give voice, to express our deepest feelings and emotions and hopes and fears and loves. The need is ours.

And so those angels up there are making a profound statement, not simply to God, but about us.

There is a growing body of academic evidence that music is important anthropologically, psychologically, even biologically. Part of being an adolescent is identifying a musical idiom to define oneself which, after all is what is supposed to happen in adolescence. Of course the music offends the older generation. That's what it's supposed to do. Their music was offensive to their parents. When I commented on my children's taste in music, I heard verbatim, my father's comments on my preferences. All societies have some form of singing and dancing, and all societies have sacred music. The name of the academic discipline that looks for it and analyses it is called Ethnomusicology. In every culture music expresses the relationship of people to the holy, the mysterious, the

other. Music from the beginning has been the way human beings have addressed what Rudolf Otto called the "Mysterium Tremendum." And in all cultures, music functions as a basic cooperative energy. We've been singing, it seems from the beginning. When we stood up on two feet and started reshaping our environment, one of the first things we made apparently, was a pipe to make music. A noted Ethnomusicologist writes: "It is safe to assume that Neanderthals were singing 100,000 years ago."

The neurologist, Oliver Sacks, who wrote The Man Who Mistook His Wife For a Hat, tells about the elderly woman in a nursing home who awoke one morning deafened by the sound of songs from her childhood in Ireland ringing in her ears. If there is a human need to praise, there is a human capacity to make and hear and enjoy music that is primal. It has nothing to do with intelligence quotients or objective reason. People with very major mental handicaps maintain basic music responsiveness. It is built into us apparently. Charles Ives wrote once, "I think there must be a place in the soul all made of tunes." Apparently he was right.

So we have a need to praise and we have the capacity - biologically, neurologically, to do it musically. That's why we sing. It's why we begin worship with a Doxology - a Hallelujah - "Praise God from whom all blessings flow." It's why we have a choir, not only to help us sing, which the old Calvinists said was the reason for having a choir, but also to sing gloriously on our behalf. It's why we have organ recitals and choral festivals and a children's choir. It's why we have an annual Festival of the Arts. It's why Dave Brubeck will play a concert in here this evening to praise the Lord with piano, bass, drums and clarinet - first cousins to lute, harp, pipe, and loud clashing cymbals. It's why we sing at the beginning and in the middle and at the end of worship.

But in spite of all that, the reality is that we are not all equally comfortable with nor happy about hymn singing as an act of praise. It's always a surprise for the clergy - who ordinarily sit here beneath the choir and organ - to sit out there with you and discover that there isn't much singing going on. The trouble is a catch 22: with a few marvelous exceptions, most of us are not wild about the sound of our own voices singing - for good reason - and so we tone it down. So does the person sitting on our left or right. And so it becomes a contest to see who can sing more softly - the purpose is not to be heard. As if anyone cares. We're not singing for one another... we're singing for God... and I reason that God gave us these voices, our instruments of praise - so they must be okay - all of them.

A newspaper columnist, Mike Hardin, wrote a funny piece about church music in which he confessed that he never understood and didn't like the hymns of the evangelical church of his youth. "Gladly, the Cross I'd Bear," he thought, was a song about a grizzly who needed glasses. He was both revolted and fascinated by the graphic aesthetics of "Lift High the Blood Stained Banner." He became a Roman Catholic as an adult and wrote that at most of the Catholic weddings he attended hymns had been replaced by "a fourteen-year-old kid in a fuchsia tux strumming a six-stringed Yamaha and braying, 'You Light Up My Life.'" In a concluding review of the musical possibilities in town on a Sunday morning he advised his readers to "stick with downtown Presbyterians whenever you can. They have a lot of

pipes and choral arrangements, and no one sings along with the Bach." [Columbus Dispatch, Sunday Magazine, 9/18/83]

The problem is a basic one defined by the contrast between that exuberant and loud music going on over our heads and the typical church-going attitude of determined, serious business, for which we dress up or down, and become our most reserved. Religion does not have to be grim. Religion should not be grim. Religion is about ideas so big and good and ultimately joyful that we have to be creative to find ways to express them. Religion is basically happy business, not superficially so: not in a way that denies tragedy, grief and sadness, nor oppressive injustice. Sometimes it is funny business. God has to have a sense of humor. God has to laugh a lot about us and with us. Funny things happen in church. I sat alone in the chancel of the First Presbyterian Church of Kalamazoo two weeks ago - a downtown Presbyterian congregation with a dignified Gothic building and lots of history and tradition - while the minister did a children's sermon. He sat down on the chancel steps with the children gathered around him and was telling them about how God loves us and wants us to be kind and considerate and peaceful. And in the middle of this, two four-year-olds began to poke and push and finally fell on each other and actually wrestled behind the Communion Table. The congregation couldn't see them - never knew a thing. The minister couldn't see them. Only I could see them - and God. I was laughing - I'll bet God was too.

It isn't grim at all. Reverence is not synonymous with sadness. The purpose of worship is to provide us a way to express a joy so profound we really don't have a way to express it alone.

Lewis Thomas, who writes beautifully about science in a way that approaches theology, in his best-seller, The Lives of a Cell, wrote an essay, "The Music of this Sphere."

"Nature abhors silence," Thomas observes.

> "Somewhere is a continual music. Almost anything that an animal can use to make a sound is put to use. Termites make percussive sounds to each other by beating their heads on the floor. Bats produce strange, solitary and lovely bell-like notes, hanging at rest upside down in the depths of the woods... Gorillas beat their chests. Fish make sounds by clicking their teeth. Toads sing to each other... even earthworms make sounds, faint staccato notes in regular clusters." [p. 21]

Thomas wishes he could hear it all - together - the "grand canonical ensemble" he calls it: the whole creation making music. What a marvelous image. "Let everything that breathes praise the Lord."

We believe in God. We believe that we are not alone, that we are intended, loved, cared for by the one who made us.

We believe that one came among us in Jesus Christ, the only son and that he lived for us, died for us, conquered death for us.

We believe that in Christ we are safe and free: that in all of life nothing will ever happen to us, including our own death, that will separate us from the love of God.

We believe things so bold and so good that merely saying them like that doesn't begin to do justice to them.

So we paint and write and sculpt and we build cathedrals. And we play music and sing. And it is in singing that we believe it best and most. That is how it should be. That is how we are made.

God has to love music. God has to love the sounds of creation.

And you and I are never more human, never more in tune with God's intention for creation than when we are playing music, listening to music, singing. God, I believe, made it so that we really do need each other in order to do this fundamental human act of praising. The only time most of us will raise our voice in song is either when we are absolutely alone and no one can hear, or when we are together and can blend our particular voices in a large voice, the voice of God's people.

Somehow when it wells up in us, that basic humanness, that awe and wonder and love at the goodness of life, the world, God, and the incredible mystery of God's love in Jesus Christ, and we give it voice, we are joining a chorus of creation, accompanied by trumpets and timbrels and loud clashing cymbals, which has been singing to God's glory since time began and will continue singing forever and ever.

Amen.